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Viewing cable 08ISTANBUL558, AKP VICE CHAIR DISCUSSES TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

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SUBJECT: AKP VICE CHAIR DISCUSSES TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY
SUCCESSSES AND GOALS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. In a recent discussion with diplomats and media representatives, Egemen Bagis, who is Turkish ruling AK Party (AKP) Vice Chairman in charge of Foreign Affairs, MP for Istanbul, and a confidant to Prime Minister Erdogan, praised the AKP's redirection of Turkey's foreign policies, offered insights into the ongoing Kurdish problem, and (predictably) predicted enhanced success for the AKP in next Spring's municipal elections. End summary.

Introduction

¶2. (U) On October 25, the Journalists and Writers Foundation (of which controversial Turkish imam Fethullah Gulen is "honorary president") sponsored a discussion titled "The Caucasus, Central Asia and Turkish Foreign Policy." The speaker was Egemen Bagis, who is AKP Vice Chairman in Charge of Foreign Affairs, MP for Istanbul, and confidant to Prime Minister Erdogan. Approximately ten persons attended, mostly foreign diplomats and representatives of international media organizations. The main points made by Bagis in a discussion that strayed far beyond the nominal subject of the talk are set forth below.

The Success of the AKP's Policy of Strategic Depth

¶3. (U) Bagis claimed the AKP's policy of "strategic depth" was inspired by President Clinton's speech to Parliament in 1999, in which Clinton said the choices to be made by Turkey in the near future would influence events for 100 years. Bagis further claimed Turkey's foreign policy is the natural outcome of its ongoing democratization process: As Turkey becomes more democratic, its government no longer needs to portray its neighbors as enemies and now needs them as friends and trading partners. He said Turkey's outreach to the East would not compromise its relations with the West, and Turkey's added value in the world of diplomacy was its "multi-geographnicity") since Turkey is a "bridge" between East and West, it is natural Turkish diplomacy emphasizes that aspect of the country.

¶4. (SBU) Bagis summarized the AKP's foreign policy successes with its neighbors as follows:

- Greece: According to Bagis, prior to the AKP coming to power, Greece and Turkey were "on the brink of war." (NOTE: A neat historical sleight-of-hand, but untrue: Greece FM Papandreou and Turkish FM Cen were well-embarked on their "seismic diplomacy" in 2000; the AKP came to power in 2002. END NOTE.) Since that time, Turkey has signed two important agreements with Greece, has substantially increased Greek FDI, has built a pipeline through Greece and has expanded air corridors. However, to Bagis the most significant symbol of the improved relations between the two countries is the fact that Greek Prime Minister Karamanlis attended the wedding of Erdogan's daughter. Bagis characterized Cyprus as the main remaining problem and said what is now needed is more dialogue and trust, which he is confident will eventually come about.

- Russia: Prior to the AKP coming to power, no leader of Russia had ever visited Turkey. Since that time, Putin has visited twice, and trade between the two countries now exceeds USD 15 billion.

- Syria: Prior to the AKP coming to power, Turkey had to stage 300,000 troops on the Syrian border and threaten war to get Syria to expel Ocalan. Since that time, Syria has been cooperating with Turkey against PKK terrorism.

- Iraq: Prior to the AKP coming to power, Turkey had almost no trade with Iraq. Since that time, it is doing USD 2 billion in trade. Bagis also claimed Turkey has suffered

the second highest number of casualties in Iraq (all civilian). Bagis said Turkey is determined to "put out the fire" in Iraq and establish a regular relationship with that country.

- Bulgaria: Bagis noted there are now four ethnic Turks in the Bulgarian Parliament, and "hundreds" of buses take people from Turkey to vote in Bulgarian elections.

- Armenia: Bagis said that after the AKP came to power it made a number of approaches to Armenia -- including allowing flights from Yerevan to Istanbul, permitting the renovation of an Armenian church in Akdamar, and suggesting the establishment of a committee of experts to look into the events of 1915. These initiatives were met, said Bagis, with silence for two years, followed by a provocation shortly after Armenian elections (COMMENT: held in February 2008), when a Turkish flag was burned (COMMENT: in Yerevan, April 2008). Nonetheless, Gul "courageously" accepted the invitation of Armenian president Sargsyan to attend a soccer match. Bagis is hopeful further acts of rapprochement will follow.

- Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform: Bagis said all parties involved have responded "positively" and while the Platform would begin as a talking shop, how it transforms itself would depend on the desires of the member countries.

EU Accession

15. (SBU) Bagis predicted Turkey will complete negotiations, but it will take more than four years to do so. Afterwards, Turkey and Europe will both be "very different." There were three possible outcomes of the negotiations: First, the Bulgarian/Romanian model, in which Turkey joins despite "shortcomings"; second, the British model, in which Turkey joins only after being vetoed several times (as the UK had been, by France); and third, the Norwegian model, in which Turkey decides in favor of a "special relationship" rather than full membership. Bagis called the accession reforms an "exercise and diet program," in which the process is more important than the end product. He also noted Turkey is "unique" among EU aspirants, in that it is already a full member of the Customs Union, and it is also a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

16. (SBU) Bagis was asked how the AKP could achieve all of the reforms sought, when certain reforms (e.g., repeal of the infamous section 301 which criminalizes speech considered "insulting" to the Turkish state and related Turkish icons) are considered red-lines by powerful groups within the country (such as the military and the Constitutional Court). Bagis said he expects opposition talk to be more extreme than opposition action, and the AKP would proceed "at a measured pace." Turkey needs a new constitution; the AKP will work with the other parties in parliament to achieve consensus; and after the March 29 local elections this will become an important issue. (COMMENT: Bagis is out of step with his AKP colleagues in Parliament, who tell us that a new constitution appears well out of reach any time soon. END COMMENT.)

Cyprus and the UN

17. (C) Bagis characterized Turkey's election to the Security Council as ironic, in that 30 years ago Turkey had been accused by the Security Council of "invading" Cyprus. Turkey's admission to the Security Council was the world's way of "apologizing" to Turkey for the Greek Cypriots not accepting the Annan Plan. (COMMENT: Bagis seems to overlook Ankara's five-year estimated USD 50 million campaign to woo African and Asian and Latin American states, many of whom might have difficulty finding Cyprus on a map. END COMMENT.) Bagis noted when Turkey gave SG Annan the power to "fill in

the blanks" of the settlement plan, this was the first time it had ever trusted a third party to be a fair broker. He characterized that decision as "almost as important" as the decision to join NATO.

¶8. (SBU) Bagis is "hopeful" a solution will be found for the Cyprus problem, and says the two sides' leaders are both acting like "statesmen." He said Turkey will support any solution within the framework of the Annan plan that is based on the political equality of the two communities. He also noted, however, both "carrots and sticks" will be needed to bring the two sides to agreement.

The International Financial Crisis

¶9. (C) Bagis said as a result of lessons learned from the 2001 financial crisis, Turkish banks have largely escaped the subprime crisis. However, since 70 percent of Turkish exports are to the EU, Turkey's economy will necessarily be affected by the current global crisis. The Turkish business sector is very adaptable and quick on its feet, and is looking to expand into other markets. As examples, Bagis listed Libya and the Gulf States as places where Turkish companies are looking to do more business. He pointed to the recent tender on construction of a nuclear plant, in which the only bidder was a Russian-Turkish joint venture, as an example of a shift in markets.

Iran

¶10. (SBU) Bagis stated Turkey believes everyone has the right to produce nuclear energy, but no one has the right to possess nuclear weapons. As evidence of Turkey's intense interest in this issue, he noted if Iran obtains nuclear weapons they will be more likely to reach Ankara or Tel Aviv than D.C. Iranians invented the game of chess and the concept of bargaining, and Turkey's main contribution to resolving this issue will be to create more opportunities for dialog.

¶11. (U) Bagis described the Nabucco gas pipeline proposal as "not just a dream" but as a "requirement" that will eventually come about, assuming that Iran makes peace with the Western world.

The Kurdish Issue

¶12. (C) Bagis said Turkey respects the Iraqi Constitution and its provisions concerning regional governments. However, he described the PKK as a "bleeding wound" that has to be treated immediately. He said the November 5, 2007 declaration by President Bush was a "turning point," and changed the attitude both of the Turkish public and of its government institutions. He said the Iraqi central and regional governments were now both much more cooperative, which made Turkey much more at ease in initiating relationships with Iraqi players. The PKK problem required both economic and cultural solutions as well as military solutions. He noted when Turkish General Staff Chair Basbug went to the southeast he met with some NGOs that support the PKK, and called this a "really big shift." He thinks the AKP has the right approach to solving the Kurdish problem, noting, for instance, 60 percent of all classrooms in the southeast were built in the last six years. Bagis pointed to the fact that between 2002 and 2007 the AKP increased its share of the total vote in the Southeast from 25 percent to 60 percent. (COMMENT: Few political observers, even within the AKP, believe their support in the southeast is close to this level now. END COMMENT.)

¶13. (C) Bagis said DTP is working very hard to ensure the Constitutional Court closes it down, in order to get sympathy

in the upcoming local elections. He said DTP members do not need the party to win elections; "the person running is what counts." Bagis attributed the recent increase in PKK violence to the upcoming local elections, stating DTP is worried it will lose support in the upcoming elections. (Comment: Bagis' claim that DTP and PKK are working together was echoed by Prime Minister Erdogan, who was quoted in the October 27 edition of Sabah newspaper, as saying, "The terror organization (PKK) and the affiliated political party (DTP) . . . manipulate terror to win public support.")

Local Elections

¶14. (U) When asked about upcoming municipal elections, Bagis said he did not want to give a numeric prediction, but anticipated the AKP would increase the number of mayorships it held, while maintaining the same level of overall support. Bagis emphasized the AKP took local elections very seriously, saying the "foundation of the AKP is with the local governments."

¶15. (C) COMMENT: The silver-tongued Bagis is in every Western diplomat's Rolodex, and is a favorite of most European Ambassadors. He is unfailingly accessible and, as a former State Department interpreter, has flawless English. He does not, however, always have a strong grip on Turkish foreign policy and we have learned to take his blithe pronouncements with a sizeable grain of salt. He does not seem to be in Erdogan's inner circle on policy, but instead serves as a public relations advocate for the AKP: presenting a face of the party that they have decided foreigners would find pleasant and palatable. END COMMENT.
WIENER